

Online-Texte der Evangelischen Akademie Bad Boll

Recent German discussions about demography from a feminist perspective

Dr. Antje Schrupp

Ein Beitrag aus der Tagung:

Women in Ageing Europe

2. FrauenForum

Bad Boll, 10. – 12. September 2007, Tagungsnummer: 361407

Tagungsleitung: Marielisa von Thadden, Kathinka Kaden

Bitte beachten Sie:

Dieser Text ist ausschließlich zum persönlichen, privaten Gebrauch bestimmt. Jede weitere Vervielfältigung und Verbreitung bedarf der ausdrücklichen Genehmigung des Urhebers/der Urheberin bzw. der Evangelischen Akademie Bad Boll.

© 2007 Alle Rechte beim Autor/bei der Autorin dieses Textes

Eine Stellungnahme der Evangelischen Akademie Bad Boll ist mit der Veröffentlichung dieses Textes nicht ausgesprochen.

Evangelische Akademie Bad Boll
Akademieweg 11, D-73087 Bad Boll
E-Mail: info@ev-akademie-boll.de
Internet: www.ev-akademie-boll.de

Recent German discussions about demography from a feminist perspective

Dr. Antje Schrupp

In the last few years in Germany there has been a broad discussion on population politics, fertility rates, and demographic change. This discussion has been filled with lots of emotions and controversies of old schemes: Left against right, young against old, workers against employers, men against women. Many books have been published, from pure statistics and economic patterns on one hand to books of advice on how to get old age successfully or how to sell products to silver age consumers.

The debate started four years ago, when a report on population development until 2050 was published by the Federal Statistical Office of Germany. According to this report, the number of children born in Germany will decrease from 800.000 to 600.000 a year, the percentage of people under 20 years of age will decrease and those of people over 60 years of age will rise significantly.

How will this development change our social and family structures, working and living conditions, pension plans and so on? Is this development mainly negative, as a majority thinks, or are there also positive aspects? What shall we do – individually and as communities? What are the responsibilities of politics? And where must they not interfere with individual life decisions?

In my paper I want to point out, why women will play a significant role in those developments. And that the challenge is not so much to strengthen certain feminist positions, to defend women's interests, but to introduce women's knowledge, opinions and needs into a debate, that until now unfortunately is widely dominated by a male perspective.

Some of the many books that have been written in the last years on the demographic issue have directly blamed women's emancipation for being the cause of all those problems, claiming that emancipation prevented women from having children. Other books however explained the reasons why women do not have more children: It is very difficult in Germany to combine motherhood and workplace, since there is no widespread public childcare for children under the age of 3 years.

It is important to see that in Germany this lively debate is a very recent phenomenon. Until a few years ago, demography was not an issue on our political agenda. At first sight this is strange, since the facts are anything but new: The average number of children per woman has been rather stable since 1975 with more or less 1.5. The highly emotional concern with fertility rates is even stranger when we consider that all demographic experts agree that there is no evidence that this number will change significantly in one direction or another in the near future.

One of the reasons for the subject of demographics being discovered only recently is, obviously, the heritage of Nazism and its racist focus on population management. And the Nazi – and even older – myth of the “German Mother” is still alive. This could even be one of the main causes for the striking difference in European fertility rates. Leaving aside the Eastern European Countries, where recent

political changes have interfered strongly with women's life-planning, we find roughly two groups of countries in the industrialized world. Some of them reach almost the mark of 2 children per woman, which is necessary for a complete reproduction of the population: Scandinavia, the United States, Great Britain, France. Others have low fertility rates ranging from only 1 to 1.5: Germany, Austria, Greece, Spain, Italy. It is difficult to point out what each of these groups has in common. It is not the religious affiliation – in both groups we find Catholic as well as Protestant countries. Neither is it the role of the state: Economically liberal countries, such as the US or the UK have fertility rates as high as Scandinavia with its well established welfare state. The only difference I see is that all of the countries in the second group share a fascist history: Germany, Austria, Greece, Spain and Italy. Obviously the heritage of this past still is a strong burden that makes it difficult to develop a free, somewhat pragmatic approach to motherhood and female independence.

Giving birth to a child and raising it, in Germany – and maybe also in other countries with fascist history – has not been considered to be a cultural act, something that must be organized, discussed and developed politically, but as a so-called “natural” part of womanhood. Still in the late 1950s the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Konrad Adenauer, was convinced, that “people have children anyway”, which meant: independently of how social, financial and infra-structural settings are organized, and that therefore there was no need for any political action in that field. Obviously he was wrong. But what is to be done now?

The most famous book in the actual demographic debate, written three years ago by a famous journalist Frank Schirrmacher, editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, already advocated the idea that liberal values are responsible for many of the problems that the ageing society will – in his opinion – bring us in the future. Even more strictly was his colleague Eva Herman, a popular TV-Anchorwoman, who in her book directly advocated the idea that women's emancipation was a mistake. She confessed that her own way to conduct a successful professional career had been wrong and appealed to women, that they should retire from the workplace, go back home and care for their husband and lots of children. But in the following debates it became obvious that woman's emancipation in Germany is nothing to be seriously dealt with. Nearly unanimously public opinion rejected Eva Hermans views and affirmed the necessity of making it possible for women to have children *and* pursue a professional career as well.

In the last two years, Angela Merkel, the first female chancellor, has initiated a modernization of laws on motherhood and child-raising: Public child-care during the work time of the mother, financial remuneration for mothers in the first year after birth but no longer to encourage women to return to the workplace in time, encouragement of fathers to play a more active role in child-care. Although there has been some resistance from some conservative older men in Merkels own party and the Catholic Church, this change was accepted by the German population without much controversy, a success due also to the persuasive power of Merkels Minister of family politics, Ursula von der Leyen, a mother of seven children and a successful physician.

So, undoubtedly, a significant change in the views of womanhood and motherhood in Germany is taking place, thanks also to a feminist movement that nowadays has reached the area of official political decision-making.

All of this will surely help to develop a more pragmatic and free way to raise children in the future, and maybe it will also help to slightly raise fertility rates. But it will not help to solve the social necessities that result from demographic change.

I do not agree with a certain feminist view that over-emphasizes the difference between Germany and other Industrial countries concerning the image of women- and motherhood.

The reason is, that the real “cultural turn” we have to deal with took place neither with Nazism, nor with the invention of the contraceptive pill in the seventies, but already one hundred years ago. And this change was similar in all industrialized countries. In Germany for example, in the second decade of the 20th century, the average number of children per women fell from over 5 to only 2. Before, having children, and not only one, but as many as possible, was self-evident in almost every woman’s life. But due to the emancipation not only of women, but also the working classes, having a child or not remained no longer something that happens naturally, but became a *decision* that has to be made – and not for the first child only, but for every subsequent child again. In the 19th century, this possibility of choosing whether to have children or not had been a privilege of bourgeois males only. But emancipation and democracy made the male-bourgeois lifestyle of individuality and self-responsibility available also for women and lower classes. This cultural change set the roots for what we call nowadays the ”optional thinking” – children are one *option* in personal life planning, nothing more. Compared to this, all ups and downs in fertility rates that followed in later decades, and all differences in the details of family politics in different European countries, are of far less importance.

So when we discuss demographic developments today, we deal with the consequences of a very important cultural turn and of social changes that took place almost a century ago. We simply cannot go back to those times.

Why then, could one ask, has all this not been discussed earlier? In fact in the 1910s and 1920s there *was* a similar discussion. Philosophers like Oswald Spengler prophesied “The Decline of the West”, while feminists like Marie Bernays had to answer the question: “Is there a direct connection between the Women’s Rights Movement and the decrease of birth rates?” – so the title of an article she wrote in 1914.

This debate was astonishingly similar to that of today. But it was rather short-lived, because the feared negative consequences actually did not happen. During the same period, when women ceased having 5,6,7,8 or 9 children and had only 2, 3 or 4, the mortality of children ceased even more significantly. Due to medical and hygienical improvements, more children survived their first years of life, with the result, that the average population age even decreased. So there was no necessity to keep the number of births on a higher level. Later, in the seventies, young immigrants moved into Germany, so that the decline of fertility rates from 2.5 to 1.5 in this decade had also no effects on raising the average age of the population. Only today, many decades later, the low fertility rates lead to real demographic changes.

The debate that followed this revelation has been partly hysterical and partly wrong, mainly because of the media hunting for sensations. For instance, we had a huge discussion last year on why academic women had far less children than others: Are they so egoistic? Are the academic structures so child-hostile? There was even a TV-show with one of our most famous entertainers giving some of the rare and highly wanted tickets for the soccer-world-championships to academic women as a reward for their becoming pregnant – no joke! Only after some months of hysteria did it turn out that those numbers were simply false, a misinterpretation. Educated women give birth to as many children as do others – what, by the way, is the true miracle, since until the 1960es female lawyers, pastors, professors and state servants were even forbidden to marry.

By now the discussion has become somewhat calmer, mainly because first political steps to a modernisation of family politics have been launched by Angela Merkel and her government. However, I think this can not be interpreted as some kind of “feminist turn” in German politics. One main reason for this change in conservative politics lies rather in the fact, that there is a reasonable fear in Germany’s economy to lack a qualified workforce in the near future. German women are highly educated and qualified, and therefore it is considered a waste of human resources to let them interrupt their professional career for several years because of child- and family-care. The professional market needs and wants young and qualified women in the workforce, and, faithful to a Christian Democratic tradition that has always been lobbying for so-called economic needs, it is only consistent that a Christian Democratic chancellor develops structures that make it not only possible but also *necessary* for women to remain in the employment market, whether they have children or not. We must not forget that the price for this change is mainly paid by the lower classes of society who now receive less state- and welfare-money than before. And, consequently, also the rights to financial remuneration of divorced women and their children by the father have been considerably weakened in the last years. The German “Hausfrau”, the homemaker or housewife, will soon be something of the past, and she will never come back.

This fact however leads us to another point strictly linked with the demographic question: How can we manage the needs of a society in which there will be a huge amount of elderly people? Until now the “housewives” do all the care-work. Even today, after one hundred years of women’s emancipation and 30 years of active gender-equality-programs, about 80 per cent of the elderly who need care or assistance are still cared for by their daughters or daughters-in-law. Family work was mostly unseen and unrewarded in the past. So who will care for the young and for the old and for the ill, when there will no longer be such a thing as a “housewife”? And under which conditions and circumstances will this work be done?

This, in my opinion, is the most important part of the demographic debate. And all the public concern with fertility rates can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid such deeper discussions: If there only were more children, there would be no need to manage cultural changes. But this is an illusion: There simply will not be more children. And even if there were, the challenge of reorganising the balance of housework, carework, and employment would remain.

In my opinion the solution cannot be found in women’s emancipation alone, which mostly means assimilation of women into the social roles and privileges that were historically considered as male. It also cannot be solved by the market, since the needs of children, aged or ill persons cannot be organized satisfactorily in patterns of economic profit. The negative implications of this route are already visible in the difficulties and sometimes the lack of quality of welfare organisations, hospitals, kindergardens. And in the private households, an increasing amount of this work is done by women of eastern European countries for very low wages and under partly illegal circumstances.

So what is necessary in my opinion is to evaluate profoundly all that was historically defined as “women’s sphere”, to discuss it in public as a central issue of politics and to integrate our cultural, political, and economical setting with the needs of caretaking and housework. This means that far-reaching changes in our political and economic institutions will be necessary, rather than only admitting us, the well educated western women, to participate – while the structures as such remain the same.

In the last few years there has already been a discussion on how the increasing age of the population will affect social structures. There are two lines of debate: One the one hand there are those who prophecy a catastrophe for the future, a battle between young and old, disastrous caring conditions, and so on. Very influential on that was this journalist I already spoke of, Frank Schirrmacher, who painted a very dark picture of Germany's future. Films and fictional documentations followed, designing a possible future of a poor and uncared-for elder generation, struggling for respect or even survival.

On the other hand there are those who deny this dark perspective, pointing out the opportunities for aging healthy and actively, the possibility of distributing the national wealth in a way that there will be no competition and controversies, or pointing out the possibilities of technical and medical intervention to improve the mobility of seniors.

In my book I tried to point out that this is a false alternative. I instead advocate to open our minds and see the potential that lies in the fact that on both sides women are a in the majority: It is mainly women who do the care work, and it is mainly women who are and get old – female life expectancy is seven years more than male. This could lead us to change our conception of what age means: What we know of older people is only what we see now: And it is obvious, that patriarchy – which means: dominion of old men over women and young men – has a lot to do with our conception of what it means to be old. Old men ruled the world until they were too weak to resist the revolutions of the young: This is the cultural pattern of patriarchy. If we leave this cultural pattern behind, we become free to invent new roles for older persons, new kinds of relationships between young and old, and in doing this we can learn a lot from the women's movement. Remember only how much gender roles have changed in the past 30 years, and how many new ideas have been invented as to what it means to be a woman. To be a woman is no longer the handicap it was in former times, but it is a possible resource of strength and self-confidence for all persons born female.

Couldn't we change our conception of what it means to be old as well? It is not a question of perspective, if the glass of water is half full or half empty, if getting old has more positive or more negative aspects. Rather it is a question of our concept of what it means to be human. There is no such thing as human "normality". The adult, healthy, educated, male and white person can no longer be our reference, while all alternatives to this "normality" are considered as inferior: especially children and old persons, but also ill and all kinds of in some way disabled persons. Instead: we will learn that being dependent is something strictly linked to being human. "We all lived subsidized lives", as Martha Fineman wrote in her book "The Autonomy Myth".

Feminists have since long criticised the male myth of individual autonomy, starting with their own status as women, which in former times had been considered as the inferior sex, a deviate variation of male normality. Can feminism help in creating a world, in which also being old is no longer seen as inferior but as a different way of being human, as a possible source of well-being for the individual as well as for communities and society as a whole? Without denying the real and often difficult and indeed negative changes that happen when we become older and weaker?

I am hopeful that an ageing society will more carefully reflect its own part in disadvantaging people only because they do not "function" a hundred percent. To make life easier for older people means making life easier for younger people too. The sheer number of older people will force us to see that all people are "inferior" in some way or another, that we all are needful and depending on others in our whole life, that in humanity there is no such thing as being "autonomous" or "normal".

This does not only concern physical abilities but also the cultural images of being old. If you compare 6 year old children, you will find a lot of similarities among them, the state of their development is rather equal. But there is virtually nothing you can conclude from the fact that somebody is 75 years old – he or she can be ill or healthy, intelligent or stupid, euphoric or depressed, lonely or with a lot of friends, progressive or conservative, still working or not.

This also is something that we have learned in the Women’s Movement: That being a woman has no fixed and ever-lasting meaning in any essentialistic or naturalistic way. What it means to be female is due to cultural codes that we are born in and in the same time able to reconstruct and change. So to admit that there is no fixed meaning of being old does not implicate to neglect the difference of being old and being young. It makes a difference if someone arrived on this Earth only a few years ago or if she or he has been living here already for several decades. But what this difference means, how it is filled with life and introduced into the self understanding of a society, is nothing fixed, nothing that can be *discovered* by scientists and experts, but something that has to be discussed, reflected and negotiated by all of us, in everyday life.

What matters first and foremost is that we should care for the relationships among people. Relationships have always been a focus of debates and cultural production, but until now it meant almost exclusively the relationship between a man and a woman. We have a lot of books, films, and poems about the love between the sexes, we have – as society and as individuals – reflected a lot about this subject, we have cried and laughed, argued and reconciled. What we need now is an equally careful debate on the relationships between old and young. The difference of age is something that has still to be discovered as a relevant subject for societies self-understanding and development.

What I find really frightening and dangerous in present discussions is a certain tendency that when those relationships are explored, then it is done so in a very instrumentalised manner. We discuss, for instance, that we have to take precautions for our getting older by making friends with younger people. Or we learn, that we should have more children to maintain Germany’s economic power. But this is a wrong approach.

True relationship, or let’s say: love, becomes impossible, if I consider the others as a means to my own ends. Therefore there is no sense in discussing the worth of younger or older persons or of women or immigrants or any other group of persons to this society. How many of them do we need to make a good future? And what should they do and what political measures should we undertake to make them do what is necessary?

This kind of debate does more harm than good. It raises distrust among us and leads to what already today is referred to as “the war of generations”. I do not want to take part in the discussions, as to whether this war really takes place or will take place or not. It is possible. But it can be also otherwise.

I’ve said that the real challenge is to evaluate what has been historically defined as “women’s sphere” and to adapt cultural and political settings to those needs. How, and that is the last point of this paper, can we advocate this?

In my opinion, the most important way is to value the differences among women. There is no such thing as a common “female interest” and no such thing as the “right feminist position”. Many of those who play an active part in demographic debates only advocate special interests or opinions they have always held. Liberal economists use this issue to advocate their liberal ideas, conservatives use it to advocate their conservative ideas, and so on. We as feminists should not join them in this harmful

and senseless pursuit. Rather, we should be open to revise even our own opinions, to be open to the future and to listen to what others tell us about their experience, their visions, and their aims.

When we start the discussion among women as to how they imagine the future, we should leave the surface of what we already know or think we know and open our minds to the deeper differences between the European cultures and between the women of those countries, of different cultural and religious and economic backgrounds, of different opinions and ambitions and, of course, of different ages and generations. The first step is to admit, that we do not already know the right way. On the contrary: The purpose of bringing women of different countries together, women of different cultures and different personal ambitions, lies in the hope, that our controversy will raise solutions that none of us can find out by herself.

The future is not something that can be explored scientifically. It is something that has to be created by political means, which means: by all of us, in our everyday life, together with all the women and men we are involved with. What is a good life for all people? What do we consider to be important and what not? What rules do we want to give ourselves to manage our daily life? The answers to those questions are not of the true-or-false-kind. We have to negotiate, we have to create new ideas, we have to convince others and be convinced ourselves, we have to make plans for our future and accept that maybe these plans might not come true, due to events that are out of our reach or due to interventions of others.

It is us, old women and women getting old in the future, who will be mainly responsible for how all this will end. But unfortunately women, and especially older women, are not considered to be a significant part of the political landscape. I call that the “Miss-Marple-Phenomena”. Miss Marple, the old detective women created by the author Agatha Christie, is constantly under-estimated by the males in her surroundings, the criminals as well as the inspectors. But her gift as an old woman who is able to listen carefully, to see beneath the surface of human relationships, and to think independently outside of the public mainstream, is always the key for the solution.

So for me, the increasing number of older women in our societies is a reason for hope, the reason why I, in the end, am more optimistic than pessimistic. In history, women often found ways out of catastrophes, created solutions for problems; they are experts in dealing with relationships, in admitting their own limited capacities and nonetheless taking responsibility not only for themselves but also for others and for the society as a whole, and they are experts in constructing a household and mediating different needs and opinions of persons who are not equal, children and adults for instance. And these are the crucial points that we depend on in an ageing society.

I want to end my paper with the words of the American author and feminist Carolyn Heilbrun:

“It occurs to me now”, she wrote, “that as we age many of us who are privileged – with some assured place and pattern in their lives, with some financial security – are in danger of choosing to stay right where we are, to undertake each day’s routine, and to listen to our arteries hardening. I do not believe that death should be allowed to find us seated comfortably in our tenured positions. Instead, we should make use of our security, our seniority, to take risks, to make noise, to be courageous, to become unpopular. Biographers often find little overtly triumphant in the late years of a subject’s life, once she has moved beyond the categories our available narratives have provided for women. Neither rocking on a porch, nor automatically offering her services as cook and housekeeper and child watcher, nor awaiting another chapter in the heterosexual plot, the old woman must be glimpsed

Dr. Antje Schrupp

Recent German discussions about demography from a feminist perspective

through all her disguises which seem to preclude her right to be called woman. She may well for the first time be woman herself.”